

Winnetou meets Gordon Gekko

A Potpourri of Slapstick, Cultural Appropriation, and Political Critique in Tom Kühnel and Jürgen Kuttner's *Hasta la Westler, Baby!*

Doris McGonagill

On our GLIB journey of discovery, we had many an eye-opening encounter: at publishing houses, literary institutions, and broadcasting stations, with authors, translators, critics, agents, and producers. While all these meetings were fruitful, few triggered conversations as impassioned as the ones we had after seeing Tom Kühnel and Jürgen Kuttner's *Hasta la Westler, Baby!* at Berlin's storied *Deutsches Theater*. In the contribution below, I aim to curate the multiple and often contradictory views the play elicited from our group before offering my own assessment, which deems the production a missed opportunity for serious social criticism. Valuable for provoking heated discussion – this play certainly pushes a lot of buttons, with plenty of amusement along the way – it does not in the end deliver a solid or innovative critique of the *Wende*.

Both highly political and deeply self-referential, *Hasta la Westler, Baby!* employs a wide array of dramatic, musical, narrative, and visual registers to tell the story of German re-unification and the decades since. In a format that structurally and stylistically replicates the historical periods it thematizes, the production includes circus-themed numbers, Looney Tunes-like short clips, and components reminiscent of a 20th-century variety show. These remarkably diverse segments, all presented by just five actors – Maren Eggert, Peter René Lüdicke, Božidar Kocovski, Katrin Klein, and author Kuttner himself – are held together by one overarching argument: the German West raided and colonialized the German East in what has been dubbed »the biggest landgrab in history.« A serious, but hardly a new charge with respect to recent German history. How seriously are we entitled to take it?

The central metaphor that Kühnel and Kuttner employ to tell the story of a hostile takeover characterized by arrogance, greed, and assumed superiority (in the West) and humiliation, victimhood, and perceived inferiority (in the East), is borrowed from the North-American context. A key segment, about a third of the way into the evening, depicts West Germans as cowboys and East Germans

as »Indians.« Considered unrefined and »primitive,« »the Indians« are tutored by »the white man« (Božidar Kocovski) in the higher art of shameless self-promotion, free market stratagems, and a kind of capitalist Orwellian newspeak that indeed appears to come directly from 1984 – both the book and the year. Several other »numbers« continued the metaphor, and while the tone on stage remained light, the political critique became increasingly somber.

Fig. 1: Katrin Klein and Matthias Trippner (live music). Photo by Arno Declair. Courtesy of Deutsches Theater.



At a similar rate, the audience's agitation begins to rise, eroding much of the good will and sympathy with the argument. Our Seminar participants were overwhelmingly American or US-based, yet we were willing to allow that deploying a pinch of Karl May might seem a plausible choice given the popularity of this author, particularly in East Germany. But superimposing complex discourses about colonization and victimhood with deliberately simplistic allusions to the American Old West invoked by the author of the *Winnetou* and *Old Shatterhand* series struck many of us as out of touch with contemporary debates and sentiments. Among all the horseplay the production presented, the »cowboys and Indians« comparison struck a wrong note. Perhaps predictably, it both backfired and overshot, lending in the opinion of many a touch of provincialism to the evening. Yes, Kühnel and Kuttner may have *wanted* to offend, but in this particular manner, they succeed in unintentional ways.

As we were debating the pros and cons of the production's representational choices, we became aware of similar and larger discussions unfolding around another Karl May-inspired Western parody, *Der Schuh des Manitu* by Michael »Bully« Herbig, released twenty years before *Hasta la Westler, Baby!* hit the stage. Arriving

with considerable delay from the US, this debate split the German public into two camps: those who criticized the parody's perpetuation of cultural appropriation and racism, and those who spoke out against »woke« and what they considered »cancel culture.« Herbig himself lamented in an article in the right-leaning German daily *Die Welt* that the »Comedy-Polizei« had become »so strict« and expressed concern that the genre of comedy might become altogether smothered by a new culture that categorically forbids stepping on anybody's toes.

What is and *should be* allowed in comedy? That question was also at stake during our evening at the *Deutsches Theater* and in our subsequent discussions. Shouldn't we hold even satire and caricature responsible for the symbolic injuries they cause, some of us asked? At the same time, shouldn't artistic license extend to satirical formats and allow for allusions also to the less than savory chapters of literary history?, others replied. And mightn't »inappropriate« imagery nevertheless make a valid point? Or does the sin of »appropriation« simply trump all other considerations? Still others from our group couldn't help wondering whether we weren't replicating the arrogance of the »Westerners« on stage by ignoring regional differences and applying North American sensibilities as universally binding. Were we blatantly, albeit unwittingly, demonstrating our own lack of sensitivity towards local contexts?

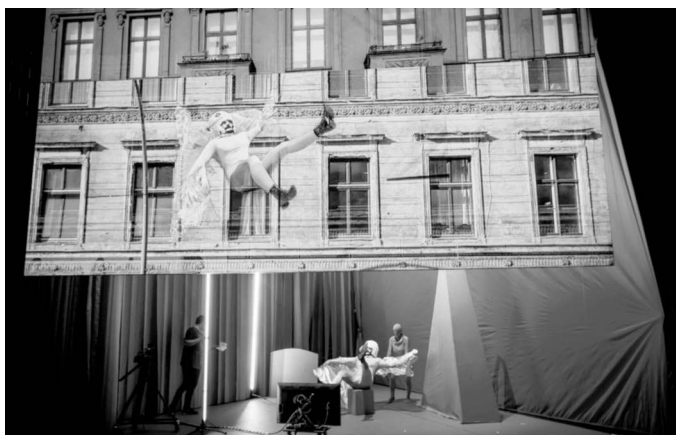
A look at other ingredients in Kühnel and Kuttner's potpourri of genres proved helpful when thinking through these thorny questions – after all, the Western discourse with its troubling cowboy and »Indians« metaphor was not the only comparison the production drew on.

There is one explicit circus number – complete with a circus director alias conferencier alias stage manager straight from the Epic Theater playbook – enacting a *Hütchen-Spiel*, suggesting the East was tricked by the West as in a shell game. Farcical exaggeration and acerbic political satire are interspersed with catchy show numbers, musical interludes, and live videos. Quotations by Erich Honecker, the long-time General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party in the East, were framed by ironic snippets from the West-German entertainment history »Made on Ku-Damm,« the famous West-Berlin boulevard that became synonymous with the capitalist entertainment industry of the post-war era. Scathing statements about the *Treuhand* agency that oversaw the integration of previously state-owned GDR companies into the unified Germany (and has long been the focus of bitter East German resentment: »The West German banks made the biggest killing«) were mixed in with a nostalgic .DR pop revue. Throughout, the musical numbers, set against some spectacular stage sets by Bert Zander, were catchy and entertaining.

Fig. 2: Maren Eggert and Božidar Kocovski. Photo by Arno Declair. Courtesy of Deutsches Theater.



Fig. 3: Božidar Kocovski. Photo by Arno Declair. Courtesy of Deutsches Theater.



Particularly successful – and nicely in sync musically with the extended allusion to the Western genre – was the adaptation of Funny van Dannen's *Bundesadler* (federal eagle) hit of 2005, which was paired with a hilarious video montage and a short (and delightfully silly) scene of the near-naked Kuttner »eagling« up in a phone box-like contraption, white feathers swirling all around him and gradually attaching themselves to his body. *Bundesadler* humor on steroids – one of the evening's high-lights in a box, literally. Was it possible that the production succeeded when satirizing the West and the younger history of united Germany, yet failed when it cast the former East in the role of the hapless victim? Were we encountering the incompatibility of relentless slapstick and cartoonish exaggeration with serious discourses on victimhood? Perhaps it was a case of mismatched expectations and inflated demands that were clashing here. (But then who was demanding too much? The theater makers? The audience?) We asked whether our discussions rose to the challenge set by the producers, or whether we were possibly falling into the very trap Kühnel and Kuttner had set out for us, enacting precisely the roles and positions intended for us. Or had the audience – to paraphrase Bert Brecht's short poem »The Solution« – »forfeited the confidence« of the theater makers, »and could win it back only by redoubled efforts«? A lot of questions, to be sure; and many surely »intended« by the production itself.

One thing was certain: the play demanded a lot from its five very talented actors. Eggert, Klein, Kocovski, Kuttner, and Lüdicke each took on many roles and rapid costume changes. Quick, almost breathless, were the shifts between the different segments. But the evening made equally high demands on the audience. The quick switches between different representational registers, between slapstick comedy and serious critique, between superimposed texts, images, and film clips, required the audience to constantly change its mode of reception and to not give in to the temptation to take anything in this satirical blend of documentation and critique at face value – neither the tongue-in-cheek polemic provocation, nor the moments of sincere political commentary, nor (and especially not!) the seemingly straightforward entertainment segments that offered thinly veiled caricatures of capitalist »Heile Welt« propaganda or ironic replays from the GDR soundtrack. Did the playwrights in this way, however, essentially play a trick on the audience, not this time with a *double* but a triple (or quadruple?) false bottom? Through all these quick-changing genres, they seek to offer a serious critique of the Western »colonial« takeover of East Germany. Yet in doing so, they've actually pulled the rug out from under the audience, rendering us unable to achieve any stable critical purchase on the play. It becomes an ever-shifting target, playfully dodging any set of criteria one might wish to impose. *It* can criticize, but *we* cannot.

Fig. 4: Katrin Klein, Jürgen Kuttner, Božidar Kocevski, Maren Eggert, Peter René Lüdicke. Photo by Arno Declair. Courtesy of Deutsches Theater.



At times, the on-stage action did not particularly play to the audience at all. The best example of this were the narrative segments that presented extended diary quotes revisiting the history of the *Deutsches Theater* during the first years of unified Germany. Through the lens of its then dramaturge, Michael Eberth (a West »import« into this revered East Berlin institution), we heard a revealing first-hand account of a true »*Besserwessi*« – an expression used in the East to describe the arrogance of know-it-all West Germans. These inward-looking segments were at once highly specific, yet so stripped of necessary context that finer nuances of the critique may well be lost on many in the audience. Most of us got the broader strokes of this political/poetical self-reflection: a cultural institution deeply engaged in the contemplation of its own mirror image from the past. And all Seminar participants were aware that in the case of the august *Deutsches Theater*, theater about history and politics frequently is simultaneously theater about theater, literature, and about this particular tradition-laden institution. Perhaps the playwrights had deliberately retrieved old theater costumes from mothballed storage just to demonstrate the production's self-referentiality? Or was it rather calculated alienation, vehicle for a critical examination of our viewing habits? Who knows.

The program booklet informs us that *Hasta la Westler, Baby!* is the third installment in a trilogy. This production was preceded by *Capitalista, Baby!* from 2011 (a persiflage of Ayn Rand's gospel of late-capitalist individualism in *The Fountainhead*) and *Feminista, Baby!* of 2017 (a dramaturgical adaptation of Valerie Solana's radical S.C.U.M. manifesto of the 1960s). Understanding that the eclectic satirical montage of sound bites and images in *Hasta la Westler, Baby!* was part of a larger critical project made us speculate whether in resorting to leftist tropes from the twentieth century,

this twenty-first-century production might have exposed »the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous« in German literary and cultural institutions – deliberately, but maybe also inadvertently.

Situating the production in the larger context of Kühnel and Kuttner's critical project made us realize that pitting troublingly one-sided narratives and hilariously limited views of history against one another constitutes much of the playwrights' overall method and wit, and lies at the heart of the tradition their theater projects are steeped in. We accepted the fact that the many different forms of projections used in this production are not arbitrary theatrical devices, but represent rather central thematic strands of their projects, reflective of collective German processes: for example, how the socialist East became a foil for Western expectations, prejudices, and, above all, capitalist ambitions; and how the colonized, disenchanted East, stripped of its identity and dignity, in turn projects stereotypes of a heartless, cut-throat marketing mentality onto the West. All well and good, as far as critical intention goes.

Acknowledging this prompted us to rethink some of our questions and revisit some of our attitudes towards the piece. Ultimately, our debates touched on the role of art and cultural institutions in general, including the *Deutsches Theater* itself. Can art be socially relevant if it is not provocative? Lurking beneath the circus concept, the variety show format, the Western metaphors, and the pop music persiflage, there seems to be a *Thesenstück*, a thesis play, that deliberately opts for provocation, one-sidedness, and hyperbole, using all three as a calculated means of jolting the complacent audience into critical reflection – and possibly out of those velvety red seats. That much seemed justifiable. But there were also profound questions about art's accountability. The vaudevillian structure of the production, the multi-genre combination of dissonant segments effectively meant that it could deftly duck any criticism launched at it by claiming »irony« and »satire.« Ultimately, I sided with the faction that argued that even a hurly-burly extravaganza like *Hasta la Westler, Baby!* must take responsibility for its possible missteps, imbalances, and dissonant appropriations. Kühnel and Kuttner's production constantly prods the audience to adjust its mode of reception, that is true. Yet in doing so, it sidesteps any potential criticism by opportunistically switching contexts, signaling with a wink to its potential critics that they are just not getting the joke. Thus, the production itself appears to play a shell game with the audience eager to interpret. In this sense, it offers the one kind of circus number thus far missing from the evening's repertoire: the escape act. Whenever a serious objection is lodged, Kühnel and Kuttner's production pulls a Houdini. Because of its insistence on perpetually switching frameworks – from the satirical and the silly to the sincere – the production became a somewhat whimsical moving target that evades criticism of virtually all kinds. As a result, however, it also renders itself incapable of formulating any genuine, sincere social critique. None of which is to deny that it is richly – and often aggravatingly – entertaining. Yet given the ambitious critical trajectory promised by *Capitalista, Baby!* and *Feminista, Baby!*,

and by the very »thesis play« lurking stubbornly within this amalgam of disparate diversions, this strikes me as a loss.

*Fig. 5: Katrin Klein, Maren Eggert, Božidar Kocovski, Peter René Lüdicke.
Photo by Arno Declair. Courtesy of Deutsches Theater.*

